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SUBJECT: POLISH ELECTIONS UPDATE: PO, PIS MAINTAIN LEAD

1. (SBU) Summary: The centrist Civic Platform (PO) and center-right Law and Justice (PiS) continue to dominate the party preference polls with little more than a week before Polish parliamentary elections September 25. The latest surveys indicate that PO still far outpaces PiS, and that, together, the likely coalition partners will have a solid majority in parliament. SLD candidate Wlozdimierz Cimoszewicz's September 14 withdrawal from the presidential race may have strengthened PO candidate Donald Tusk's lead, with one poll putting his support at 50 percent. Tusk and PM-apparent Jan Rokita (PO) have both signaled their preference for a coalition government with PiS, even if PO were to win an outright majority on its own, reasoning that it would be better to deal with PiS in coalition than in opposition. End summary.

2. (U) The most recent reliable opinion poll, released September 15, put support for PO at 36 percent, with PiS next at 23 percent, followed by the governing SLD at 9 percent, the right-wing LPR at 8 percent, and the populist Self-Defense at 7 percent. This survey projected that PO and PiS would win 348 of the total 460 parliamentary seats, well above the two-thirds needed to amend the constitution. Another poll released that day showed even higher levels of support for PO and PiS (42 and 24 percent, respectively), but that survey is considered less reliable because it was conducted by telephone. Strikingly, the rest of the field was reduced to single-digit levels of support in both polls.

3. (U) The departure of Cimoszewicz from the presidential campaign may have boosted Tusk's support slightly, as a third of Cimoszewicz supporters had listed Tusk as their second choice in earlier polls. A poll taken immediately after Cimoszewicz's announcement indicated that support for Tusk had risen to 50 percent (versus 29 percent for PiS rival Lech Kaczynski), fueling speculation that Tusk might win the presidency in the first round. In any case, Cimoszewicz's withdrawal was yet more bad news for the Kaczynski campaign, which had still hoped, against all evidence, to face the SLD candidate in the second round.

4. (SBU) The public reaction from the PO camp to its sustained surge has been characteristically restrained, as its leaders seek to avoid appearing overconfident and alienating potential supporters. Both Tusk and Rokita stated publicly September 16 that PO would prefer to have PiS join it in a coalition government, even if PO were to win a parliamentary majority on its own. Better a coalition government with broad public support than a single-party government with weaker public backing, Rokita reasoned. Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, leader of PO's Warsaw list, confirmed that view with us, noting that some in the party have become enthusiastic about the prospect of governing alone, but most recognize that it will be much easier to have PiS in coalition (however difficult, especially on economic issues, that will be) than to have to face them in opposition. Ashe